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Beyond the asylum-applications growth. The limits of the Spanish refugee reception program

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Abstract

Based on two extended qualitative research projects conducted between 2017 and 2022, this paper analyses the refugee reception programme (RP) in Spain, which is managed both by the central state and some specialised social organisations. This cross-sectoral RP presents notable and enduring problems, which have deepened since the increase in asylum applications during the so-called European refugee crisis in 2015. This paper affirms that, although this increase in asylum seekers represents a serious challenge, the persistent shortcomings of the RP are better explained by a set of structural factors related to (1) the restrictive institutional model of asylum and immigration policy, (2) the lack of development of the RP, its dispersal policy and its social intervention design, (3) the lack of multilevel governance between the State and the municipalities and regional administration and (4) the current neoliberal and nativist policies.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, due to the so-called European refugee crisis and the policy reforms implemented to address it, asylum reception programs have been facing serious problems, both at national and European Union (EU) level (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Glorius et al., 2019).

This crisis affected seriously the Spanish asylum system, since the number of asylum applications grew sharply from 5615 applications in 2014–0.90% of the total applications in the European Union (EU), to 54,050 in 2018–8.14%, and to 117,945 in 2022–12.26% (Eurostat, 2023). This increase was initially dominated by applicants from Syria (38.5% of the total applicants in 2015), but Latin American applicants—especially Venezuelans—soon became the majority, since their applications rising from 9.6% in 2015 to 85.7% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023), due to their easier access to Spanish territory—the main route to apply for asylum—in contrast to the difficulties faced by other refugees in the Spanish selective migration system.

Although most advanced economies continue to assume a very small share of the global refugee burden—16%—compared to developing countries—84% (CEAR, 2022), the increase in asylum applications in Spain overwhelmed the asylum system and the capacity of the Reception Programme (RP), triggering an urgent legal and financial response from the state (Iglesias et al., 2023; Pasetti et al., 2022), which led to an increase in public asylum expenditure, an expansion in the number of reception places (from 900 in 2015 to 9990 in 2022), and an increase in the staff working in the system.

However, despite these important efforts in terms of policy reform and expenditure, a thorough review of the literature shows that the Spanish asylum system continues to have structural problems in its three fundamental pillars:

Firstly, the possibility of applying for asylum in Spain is increasingly complicated, not only due to the process of greater control and externalisation of its external borders, but also due to the constant difficulties refugees encounter when applying for asylum once in the country such as persistent delays in formalising and processing asylum applications and in accessing residence and work permits, and also due to the very high rejection rates (Gabrielli et al., 2021).

Secondly, the RP, managed by the central State and a group of specialised NGOs, continues to suffer from a variety of structural deficiencies such as delays in accessing the programme, lack of resources, lack of adaptation to the multiple profiles of asylum seekers, secondary displacement, etc. (CEAR, 2022; Jubany & Rué, 2020; Pasetti et al., 2022).

And thirdly, the poor integration outcomes of refugees in Spain. Thus, most Asylum-seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection (ASBIP) in Spain suffer from labour, residential and social vulnerability, and some of them fall into social exclusion situations (Iglesias et al., 2023; Pasetti et al., 2022).

Delving into these findings, this paper focuses on answering two relevant research questions based on the data obtained in two recent studies on the subject, to finally discuss the results with the current international state of the art.

RQ1 What are the main problems currently faced by the Spanish State-NGOs RP?

RQ2 What factors explain the persistence of these problems within the Spanish RP, in addition to those derived from an increase in the number of asylum applicants?

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The scientific literature on RPs has been extensive in the field of refugee studies over the last few decades analysing their main shortcomings and the factors that explain these problems from a holistic perspective (Bakker et al., 2016; Korac, 2003; Van-Liempt, 2011).

One of the main issues highlighted is the underdevelopment of RPs, especially in Southern European countries where the state has traditionally tried to avoid the so-called refugee burden despite EU legal requirements. A restrictive trend that some northern European countries have followed in recent years (Ponzo, 2022).

Several tactics have been employed to deliberately underdevelop reception systems: legal and political lack of definition, reduction of the public budget and benefits for ASBIP, outsourcing of the management of asylum resources, increasing restrictions on access to asylum and reception services and benefits, continuous changes

in the programme with short-term expansion phases during humanitarian emergencies and subsequent cuts once the crisis is over (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Darling, 2016).

According to the literature (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011; López-Sala & Moreno-Amador, 2020), this underdevelopment of RPs is directly linked to the current global restrictive institutional asylum regime (Zetter, 2007), which through various measures—border control and externalisation, under-resourced asylum systems and its RPs, dissuasive administrative practices and exclusionary institutional labelling—seeks both to deter the arrival of potential asylum seekers from the Global South and their access to international protection, in order to avoid their economic, logistical, and socio-political costs (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022).

For other authors (Darling, 2016; Ponzo, 2022), these underdeveloped RPs are also an expression of both the current hegemonic neoliberal policies that promote the reduction of the public sector, especially welfare policies, and the growth of nativist policies in Western countries that emphasise the preference of natives over 'immigrants' in the labour market and Welfare.

Scholars have also analysed the role of dispersal policies in RPs (Darling, 2016; Vaughan et al., 2003), highlighting their negative impact on the integration trajectories of ASBIP, as they isolate individuals from their supportive ethnic networks and reference communities and from the most dynamic labour markets, concentrating them in stigmatised areas with numerous social problems due exclusively to their cheaper housing supply.

Paradoxically, these measures, instead of fostering local settlement and integration, lead to secondary displacements as refugees actively seek those elements that specifically facilitate their integration (Stewart & Shaffer, 2015; Van-Liempt, 2011).

These dispersal policies are also explained by the growing application of the restrictive asylum paradigm and the consolidation of neoliberal and nativist policies in Western countries. In fact, their main objectives are not so much to integrate asylum seekers, but rather to reduce reception costs, to distribute the 'burden of refuge' between different territories, or simply to isolate refugees for immigration control reasons.

Scholars have also pointed to the lack of multi-level governance of RPs as one of the most relevant issues in the field (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Caponio & Ponzo, 2022). This lack of coordination among the different actors is basically expressed in the growing centralisation of European RPs since 2015 crisis and in the subcontracting and privatisation of official programmes to regional administrations, municipalities, and NGOs, generating various operational problems such as insufficient and unstable funding; staff job insecurity; internal 'balkanisation' of the system, with enormous differences between territories and administrations; and the growth of networks of reception actors operating in parallel without coordination (Borelli et al., 2023; Ponzo, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This paper analyzes the problems of the Spanish asylum-seekers' RP using data collected in two empirical research projects conducted in recent years. The first one, developed between 2016 and 2018 in the main Spanish reception regions, included 75 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 45 ASBIP and 30 experts from the Spanish RP. The second one, the EU PERCEPTIONS project was conducted between 2020 and 2023, and included 26 in-depth interviews carried out in Spain with migrants and asylum seekers, as well as professionals from the Spanish asylum system.

In both studies, discussion groups and workshops with asylum experts and practitioners, as well as participant observation during the fieldwork, were performed to broaden the information and analysis.

The sample of ASBIP interviewed was based on their main sociodemographic characteristics: citizenship, age, sex, educational level, refugee status, and Spanish host region. The diversity of backgrounds was also considered, they came from Syrian, Sub-Saharan African countries (Mali, Ivory Coast, Sudan, Cameroon, Somalia, and Guinea-Bissau), Latin American (Venezuela, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras), Middle Eastern (Iraq, Palestine, Iran,

Yemen), Ukraine, and other countries (Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan). The experts came from the Directorate-General of Migration and State centres, NGOs working in the RP, regional administrations, city councils, NGOs working with refugees outside RP, and scholars.

The saturation of the information was in both cases the criterion that determined the number of interviews. All the interviews were anonymized for the analysis.

THE SPANISH RECEPTION PROGRAMME

International protection in Spain is regulated by the Law 12/2009, October 30. Anyone who aspires to request international protection in Spain must submit her/his application during their first month of stay in the country, and later formalise it through an asylum interview. The Office of Asylum and Refuge (OAR) of the Ministry of the Interior must examine the admissibility of that application within 1 month of the interview. Once the application is preadmitted, the asylum applicant receives the so-called 'red card' that accredits her/him as such. Then, the OAR examines asylum applications within a period of 6 months, although in practice this period can last up to 2 years. During the first 6 months, the *red card* allows asylum seekers only to live in Spain and after 6 months the asylum applicants are automatically granted the work permit. The Spanish RP is developed by the RD 220/2022, as part of the institutional asylum framework. It is designed as a public system managed by the Secretary of State for Migration that is part of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (MISSMI), the OAR also plays a relevant role in this design.

This RP is mainly oriented to asylum applicants who do not have sufficient financial means and its support is currently divided into three consecutive stages: an initial pre-evaluation period, and two phases of intervention: a first of reception (6 months) and a second one of autonomy (6–12 months) (Art. 11.1 RD 220/2022). In total, it is established that the programme 'should not exceed 18 months' (Art. 11.7 RD 220/2022), although there are certain margins for vulnerable situations.

During the first reception phase, asylum applicants live in centres and other accommodation facilities scattered all over the country with a total of 9958 residential placements with only 25% of them located in Madrid and Barcelona provinces (CEAR, 2022), which are financed by the National government and managed almost exclusively by NGOs since only four State managed centres exist. However, the decision about the centre and the place of destination of asylum seekers corresponds to the National government. Those centers cover asylum seekers' basic needs including various kinds of social support: professional training, language learning, legal and psychological support, counselling services, etc. Since they arrive, asylum applicants are registered at the municipal level, which allows them to access the Spanish public health and education system.

In the second phase of intervention, autonomy, the ASBs must leave the housing facilities and integrate autonomously into the local community. To support this process, the national government, in addition to the work permit, provides a limited monthly benefit for housing and basic household expenses. They also continue to receive integration support from NGOs. Since 2021, this second phase has been exclusively for those applicants who have a favourable asylum resolution.

RESULTS

Since 2015, the number of asylum applicants has grown progressively in Spain, overwhelming and sometimes collapsing the asylum system and the RP's capacity that was politically designed to deal with a lower number of asylum seekers. In this context, the national government and the NGOs rapidly reacted and set-in motion multiple reforms to improve the country's refugee reception capacity (CEAR, 2022). However, despite such measures, the most relevant Spanish RP's structural problems have persisted so far.

Spanish RP's persistent problems

As the Spanish RP is primarily aimed at those asylum seekers who do not have sufficient financial resources, and due to the limitations of the programme and its relatively low capacity, most asylum seekers settle in Spain without the support of the RP (OPI, 2023), relying mainly on their family and ethnic support networks. In this context, Latin American asylum seekers benefit over other origins due to their established immigrant communities with dynamic networks and resources.

Those asylum seekers try to access the RP face constant delays due to persistent setbacks in the formalisation of asylum applications and the overstretched reception capacity of the system, which has always lagged the demand for reception, despite significant national investments in recent years.

While asylum seekers wait to access the RP, a significant number of them get by with informal jobs and the support of their ethnic networks, but others are forced to turn to municipal or NGO emergency programs, such as homeless centres:

> (They took me to) a hostel (…) They (a public body responding to emergency social situations) told me that (the hostel was full), that I had to sleep (…) in a chair (…) They gave me breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I stayed for four days, and they told me I couldn't stay any longer (…) They sent me to (a homeless shelter) (…) and it was a bit difficult for me. About 25 people in the same room (…) (So) I decided to go to a hostel until the appointment (to formalize the asylum-application) (…) I talked to my family in Sweden (refugees) to help me, and they sent me money to pay the hostel.
>
> (Man, Asylum-seeker (AS), Iraq)

Therefore, because of this structural delay in access to RP, many asylum seekers are pushed into situations of vulnerability or social exclusion, such as vulnerable housing and subsistence allowances, homelessness, living with groups with severe social disadvantages, continuous displacement, etc. All this prolongs their situation of instability and uncertainty.

> When I arrived at Madrid, I lived for five days on the street because of I didn't have a place to sleep. After that, (I lived) in a shelter.
>
> (Man, AS, Ukraine)

The overflow and collapse of the RP's capacity due to the insufficient number of accommodation places in a context of sustained growth in asylum applications, have put the programme itself and the agents working in it under severe pressure.

This pressure is transmitted throughout the whole programme 'as if it were a clot', negatively affecting its social intervention that has tended to shorten the time spent with applicants, and sometimes pushing them to make hasty progress in their processes of incorporation. The programme, under this pressure, has thus become in recent years a kind of standardised and intensive *reception assembly line*, which ends up producing worse integration results.

The third persistent problem has been the lack of continuity between the asylum seekers' initial settlement processes and the RP. Many asylum seekers and their families carry out incorporation processes into the local community while they are waiting to access the asylum system and RP: insertion into local neighbourhoods, informal jobs, building social networks and contacts, accessing social services such as health and school system, social intervention processes, etc.

When these applicants access the RP, they ask not to be displaced to other cities, and be able to continue with their incipient processes of local rootedness:

> I was living in Cartagena in a room (in a shared flat) (…) It is the second year (there) (…). I went to the NGO (…) and they told me that the center (first phase) can be anywhere in Spain. "It is not certain in Cartagena", they told me. And I said: "What about my studies? And my partner?" (…) "I already know people here, I am integrating into society (…) I prefer to stay here".
>
> (Woman, AS, Syria)

However, the programme, especially since 2015, is often unable to properly continue these incipient settlement processes for logistical reasons, sending asylum applicants to cities where housing is available, pushing them to restart their integration into the local community. Moreover, if asylum seekers do not to accept the city and the housing offered, they are forced to forgo the benefits of the RP, forcing them to choose between their fledgling settlement in the local community and the support of the programme, rather than these two dimensions building on each other:

> (The OAR) told me that the center could be anywhere: Malaga, in the north. For me, the best place is Madrid because I have a friend, and the guys I live with help me a lot. And the Spanish teacher too (…) That's why I didn't want to leave Madrid. I'm fine with this house (…) And I said: "I'm not going". That's why I didn't go to the reception center (renouncing to the programme).
>
> (Man, AS, Iraq)

During the first phase of the programme, the main challenge is to match the ASBIP's profiles, and their integration needs with the type of social intervention provided in the available centres. For vulnerable refugees, the RP's first intensive phase, with accommodation and a full board, is perfectly suited to their needs. In fact, they would usually demand to spend more time in these facilities before starting the autonomy phase:

> When we are working with vulnerable people who come with mental health issues and post-traumatic stress (…) the first phase's deadlines do not make any sense.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

For others, on the contrary, this intensive and protected first phase does not properly fit their situation as they need direct support to back up their autonomous local integration processes. For many of them, this initial and compulsory phase becomes 'lost' time where they feel trapped:

> Please make a better system for refugees (…) with three points: home, language, and work. And it will work (…) But if you force me to stay for six months in a "camp," after these six months I won't know how to do anything!
>
> (Man, AS, Syria)

In the second phase of the RP, ASBs leave the centres, become autonomously incorporated into the local community and face all kinds of problems: difficulty in accessing housing and the labour market, ethnic discrimination, job insecurity, low and unstable income, small and overcrowded apartments, loss of social status, etc.:

> At the (Center) we were fine because since everything is paid for, I don't have any (…) problems. When you leave it, here the problems start (…) language barriers, document problems, problems to receive the State benefit, labor problems, asylum-claim problems (…) you need to pay the bills, electricity, telephone (…) It's very difficult.
>
> (Woman, AS, Syria)

During this transition between phases, many applicants are also forced to move from inner cities to working-class suburbs where rents are cheaper, disrupting their previous community integration processes:

> They are not going to find housing (…) Of course, when people have been living in Barcelona (city) for nine months (in the first phase) with their children (at school), now go and tell them that they must go to Busquets (a municipality one hour away by transport on the metropolitan outskirts of the city).
>
> (Decision-Maker, Regional Administration)

In these transitional months, and despite their limitations—low amount and duration, bureaucratization, and trade-offs—the second phase's State benefits for accommodation and maintenance support are essential in enabling ASBs to cope with their social, residential and employment vulnerability:

> We live (his wife and three children), with my uncle's family (also a refugee) because the benefit is small (…) the rent benefit, (is) 376 euros (…) You must share the flat because (…) if I want to rent a room, minimum 400-500 euros, very expensive (…) and for food they give me 346 euros.
>
> (Man, AS, Syria)

When the RP's intervention ends, and they start living on their own means, many ASBs go through situations of vulnerability and social exclusion characterised by serious residential and employment instability.

Fragile situations question the effectiveness of the RP and compel many applicants to resort again to programs aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion:

> It is like dressing them up and then suddenly undressing them. Something similar happens with (the programme's) benefits. They run out and their real situation of lack of work, of being without income, of vulnerability… emerge again.
>
> (Practitioner, State Center-RP, Fieldwork's notes)

Another recurrent problem of the programme is secondary displacements. Therefore, many ASBs decide to leave the city where they have carried out their community integration process supported by the RP and move to other municipalities and provinces, especially Madrid and Barcelona, in search of greater job opportunities and their supportive ethnic networks. This displacement wastes much of the previous programme's integration intervention, and forces ASBs to restart their settlement process in other cities:

> The pull effect (…) People will go where there are jobs. People are going to go to Barcelona, they are not going to stay in Jaén (…) (or) they are going to go to Madrid, Bilbao, or Valencia, as any Spaniard (does). And not to see this is to postpone the problem.
>
> (Practitioner, City Council)

Finally, it is worth noting the problems faced by the RP because of the high number of asylum seekers whose applications are rejected, around 100,000 between 2020 and 2022. Former applicants who, despite the expulsion order, remain in the country in a situation of irregularity, informal work, and social vulnerability and exclusion, until they manage to regularise their status, generally by means of the 'arraigo', one of the few regularisation channels in place in Spain.

This huge 'factory of irregularity' that is the current asylum system disrupts the ongoing integration processes and the interventions carried out in the RP, discourages many professionals from the programme and wastes public funds and the integration efforts made with the applicants:

> a lot of work, money and time that we invest (of the RP), public money, (…) of the State itself is lost.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

The factors explaining the RP's persistent problems

All these shortcomings of the RP and their negative integration consequences have usually been unilaterally explained as the result of the growing number of asylum applications in Spain since 2015. However, although this element has been relevant, the RP's gaps are better explained by the deficits of the Spanish institutional model of asylum.

Therefore, the first factor is the so-called restrictive asylum paradigm. This restrictive approach in the asylum model seeks to limit and externalise the arrival and management of potential asylum seekers due to two main reasons: the 'threat' posed by the potential volume of refugees from the global south, and the logistical-economic and, especially, political-electoral cost of receiving them:

> There is a lot of rejection of foreigners in Europe, especially those from Muslim countries. You notice it, you notice it in the tube (…) they said: "Sure, because this one gets benefits because she is an immigrant" or: "these people are coming and taking our jobs" (…) So, I think it's going to get worse (…) People don't really say it out loud because people are educated, but they all feel the same; that hatred and rejection.
>
> (Woman, Association Leader, AS)

A restrictive asylum model implemented through a panoply of different measures: reinforced and externalised border controls, restrictive visa policy, subordination of asylum policy to labour migration flow, dissuasive administrative practices in accessing and processing the asylum procedure, labelling—and treatment—of asylum seekers as irregular immigrants, high applications rejection rates and internal border controls (Barbero, 2021; López-Sala & Moreno-Amador, 2020).

Within those measures aimed at reducing asylum, it would be the strategy to contein the RP's development since a well-funded and tidy RP is thought to act as a magnet for new asylum applicants:

> I'm afraid asylum is going to increase because (refugees) are seeing that if you ask for asylum you are entitled to several things. And people are making a living. That's how it is (…) Let's see how this is regulated because it's going to burst us.
>
> (Staff RP, MISSMI)

The aim of avoiding this possible pull effect would thus explain the multiple deficits that the Spanish programme still has, despite its expansion since 2015, such as lack of implementation of the European reception directives, ambiguous legal frameworks, lack of medium and long-term planning and programme's development from the emergency, continuous overflow of reception capacity, irregular and limited funding, lack of staff, and subordination of integration criteria to logistical-economic ones.

One element intimately associated with this restrictive approach would be the high application rejection rate in Spain which, in terms of subsidiary protection and refuge, was 87% in 2021 and 92% in 2022, well above the European average (Eurostat, 2023).

This high rate of rejected applications means that thousands of applicants are forced each year to abandon the programme and the interventions underway. Thus, the Spanish asylum system, after allowing a regular stay in the country, ends up turning most of the applicants into undocumented immigrants

and channelling them as informal and cheap labour towards the labour market, and towards regularisation through employment. This process, on the other hand, is fully consistent with the core of the Spanish labour migration policy.

But not everything is explained from this restrictive approach. There are other RP's deficits that are linked to its intervention model as the Spanish programme is designed on an idealised conception of integration where asylum seekers, after an initial period of emergency, begin a linear and cumulative process of adaptation, acculturation and capitalisation leading them to stable employment and autonomous insertion into society.

However, this idealised integration narrative and its intervention design clash head-on with at least three characteristics of the current social reality.

First, it collides with a social context where the advance of the precariat has broken with the linear accumulation of labour and social gains, and where, in addition, the immigrant population from the so-called global South is occupationally and economically segregated. Most applicants, therefore, will not have access to regular employment and a stable income but will be maintained at the bottom of the labour market in temporal and low-wage manual occupations.

Second, with the intense refugees' social, gender and ethnic heterogeneity and their diverse personal, family, and social situations, which clearly goes beyond the stereotype of the vulnerable refugee. And third, with the ASBIP's complex integration trajectories, where there are continuous advances and setbacks in different dimensions and disparate paces of adaptation.

Therefore, reducing the tremendous diversity of ASBIP' integration profiles and trajectories to a rigid or standardised intervention design or mould in two staged and compulsory phases of action, conceived from a linear and cumulative conception of integration, can only lead to creating negative effects on applicants.

In fact, forcing asylum seekers, vulnerable socioeconomically but with active personal and relational resources, to go through the first supervised phase—as the programme systematically does—can only have negative effects on their insertion trajectories and on their emotional well-being, as what they do need are flexible supports to backup their autonomous integration processes:

> They are not flexible (…) If someone is telling you that they don't want to (be) in centres, but they need a little push to live outside (…) But they don't accept this (…) I have to do the first phase, to get to the second phase, and wait for me to leave the center and be able to be like I am now (living autonomously in a flat). It makes no sense! (…) I think they (should be able to) skip the first phase to help in the second phase. (…).
>
> (Woman, AS, Syria)

On the contrary, for those ASBIPs with more vulnerable situations and profiles, this first phase of intensive protection seems to be the most appropriate. However, sometimes the rationale of the programme itself and the need to vacate placements forces refugees to move to the autonomy phase when they are not ready:

> Now they spend an average of six months in the reception facilities, a totally insufficient time to work with people (…) You -as asylum seeker- have not had time to adjust your expectations. You haven't had time to know where you are, who you are in this country. You are still thinking about what is happening in your country, how your family is (…) The strictness and rigidity of the system.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

This disconnection between the diversity of asylum seekers' profiles and the two-phases-standardized intervention model has aggravated since 2015 due to the increasing programme's reception pressure:

> Now the programme is like to put the same suit on everyone, to some it leaves bare feet, and to others the head.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP, Fieldwork notes)

The poor design of the programme's accommodation system—both its territorial location and the criteria for distributing applicants within it—helps to explain many of the reception problems. A design in which integration criteria—the existence of ethnic support networks, dynamic labour markets, support organisations, integration policies or the existence of ethnic anonymity—have been subordinated to logistical, economic and political criteria:

> We must be inflexible. The placements are where they are! We have been opening where we can. We have been quite successful in ensuring that there is a presence all over the territory (…) We have tried to ensure that in places where there is a lower unemployment rate, there is a greater number of placements, but it is not always possible.
>
> (Staff RP, MISSMI)

Due to the EU's Dublin Regulation, which obliges asylum seekers to apply for asylum in the first European country of entry, the Spanish programme is forced to take in applicants who would have better chances of integration in other countries due to their language competency, the presence of family and ethnic supportive networks, and better social and refugee policies. Disregarding these integration factors, with the aim of favouring a better sharing of the European asylum burden or the development of national asylum systems, as EU regulation does, ends up harming the applicants themselves and their integration trajectories:

> My parents did not want to (apply for asylum in Spain) (…) My grandfather works in Belgium (…). Our plan was to go to Belgium (…) We were in Spain for a week (…) and we left (…) In Belgium they welcomed us (…) and you have the family (…) They help you there, they are very organised (…) they don't throw you out or cut off your benefits like here, where after a year and a half they say "Ok, bye, bye, go". And they take care to teach you the language seriously (…) We were there for four and a half months (…) then this trap of Dublin (…) and then back (…) to Spain.
>
> (Man, AS, Syria)

In Spain, this territorial distribution of applicants is also intended to spread the burden of asylum among different territories and public administrations, to share the costs and to reduce the fear that an 'excessive' presence of refugees could cause public alarm and electoral punishment.

> There were protests and frictions (in one municipality) when they (the refugees) arrived (…) They say to you: 'Man, what, now there are all kinds of services for immigrants, because they pretend to be refugees' (…) When you manage the day-to-day you must be quite cautious.
>
> (Head of Employment, Regional Administration)

Logistical rather than integration aspects have been more important in decisions on the location of reception places. Therefore, criteria such as the prior existence of residential resources, the free offer of accommodation facilities by local actors, or the lower cost of housing and living in peripheral provinces have been decisive to incorporate accommodation spots into the RP.

Many RP's placesments are thus dispersed in territories where the probabilities of integration are very low, fueling ASBIP's secondary displacements:

> 'We have to open! We must open!' Wherever they give us a building, or whatever! (…) in very small towns. There, in the middle of very large, sparsely populated provinces. And suddenly you have 80 people there. Where the people themselves tell you that they have no possibility of social incorporation (…) but they are already there.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

On the other hand, the RP's overflow and increasing social-attention pressure have meant that the criterion systematically used by the State to assign centre, province and integration environment to applicants is mainly the availability of an unoccupied residential placement:

> (The social worker) started looking for places (…) She told me: 'Look, what I can send you is to a place where perhaps the economy is not very good' (….) 'Well, whatever you say', I told her. Anyway, (whatever she said) it was going to be the same thing (…) I want Madrid. How do I demand it? (…) They sent me out of Madrid, to Cordoba.
>
> (Man, AS, Venezuela)

Another RP's criterion to assign accommodation centres to asylum applicants is to try to distance them from their co-nationals, avoiding thus the formation of ethnic ghettos that would hinder their integration processes:

> and we did not want to create ghettos (…) because in the end they were only going to relate to their (ethnic) circle and we have separated them (…) so that they can relate to their neighbourhood, to their local neighbors.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

This intervention approach, which in addition to being assimilationist is detrimental, forgets the fundamental role of supportive ethnic networks in promoting incorporation, and the mixed nature of integration where the ethnic and the native, rather than cancelling each other out, intertwine and provide positive feedback. The approach, on the contrary, should be to promote integration into 'the native environment' starting from the support of

> their network of countrymen who have been here longer (…) when you have a need, your social network is what supports you, even more than the public services themselves.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-Non-RP)

Summarising, when ASBs are assigned a reception facility, often the territory and social context in which they will spend the next 18–24 months has not been thought out and selected based on integration criteria, but rather for logistical, economic, and political reasons which, however relevant they may be weaken the rootedness and enable secondary displacements.

The fourth Spanish reception model's structural deficit is its lack of multilevel governance.

In Spain, the State is responsible for the design, funding, and general management of the RP, playing a minor role in the implementation of the programme, as it only owns four public reception centres—only 5% of the RP's housing slots. The RP's implementation is subcontracted and therefore almost exclusively carried out by a set of NGOs that receive annual state funding for doing this task.

The deficit of this model, however, does not lie in the combination of both actors in a public policy, but rather in the fact that the state transfers or 'privatise' the implementation of the asylum RP to the third sector through an ambiguous and changing regulatory framework based on unstable, tight, and short-term funding, and very demanding bureaucratic requirements.

Outsourcing model that generates negative effects on the RP: unstable and short-term planning and projects, temporary contracts and high labour turnover, limitations in the intercultural training of staff, excessive bureaucratic burden, and reduced intervention time:

> We spend much of our effort and working time on bureaucratic documents instead of on people. If I dedicated all this effort to people, I could accompany them much more (…) If, instead of being an administrator, I were a social worker…
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

This hybrid model although it has positive effects in terms of flexibility and closeness within the intervention, have also negative effects in terms of NGOs' autonomy and legitimacy, especially in relation to their capacity to denounce and pressure the State and its restrictive migration and asylum policy, since the opposite, denunciation, and pressure, would mean 'biting the hand that feeds them'. Therefore, this outsourcing model creates strong contradictions within the organisations as they behave both as providers committed to asylum seekers and, at the same time, as 'executive and visible arms' of the restrictive asylum and reception measures.

The second major weakness in this area is the lack of formal articulation between the Spanish RP and some of the main agencies working on refugee and immigrant integration and social cohesion in the country: city councils, regional public administration, and other social organisations:

> that we are not at one; that it is not a common effort (…) there is a lack of coordination at national, regional and local level. (…) For us it is hell.
>
> (Practitioner, NGO-RP)

Before, during, and after their time in the RP, ASBs use resources and services from these actors, but there are usually no institutional coordination mechanisms with them. In fact, local and regional administrations openly criticise the fact that the State administration does not coordinate the opening of reception placements or the arrival of asylum applicants to their territories with them, forgetting that they are the ones who will ultimately integrate people using their own inclusion resources and funds:

> It cannot be that the State opens (reception) placements (…) without having a budget allocation for the municipality, because in the end (…) integration is something we cities eat! (…) In terms of impact, the arrival of a hundred new (refugee) people in a neighbourhood causes me some "shocking" problems (…) complaints from the neighbourhood (…) collapse of some services, of problems in some schools because (they are) already quite full.
>
> (Practitioner, City Council)

The negative effects of this lack of coordination become even more evident when asylum applicants finish the RP—or their applications are rejected and they are expelled from it—and are 'gathered' in conditions of vulnerability and, sometimes, of social exclusion, by these public and third-sector actors:

> When I have a Syrian family that has left phase 2, sleeping on the street, The problem is mine! (…) People that I then must receive in my social service, with often enormous problems, and without a single euro more in resources from the State.
>
> (Practitioner, City Council)

Sometimes, as a reaction to this lack of multilevel governance, the local or regional administration promoted other refugee reception programmes different from the State ones, increasing the fragmentation of the reception resources.

Summarising, the intervention with refugees works usually as a kind of negative 'projectorate' since, in the same territory, different actors intervene on the same subjects without the necessary formal coordination between them, weakening the scope of the intervention, especially in housing and employment issues, and duplicating the intervention processes.

Finally, it should be noted that many of the limitations of the asylum RP are linked to the shortcomings of the state's migration policy.

Spain has not traditionally been a country of asylum. Since the 1990s, the state has clearly opted for labour migration due to the need for cheap and flexible labour for its intensive economic model. A migratory flow that has been managed through a laissez-faire policy, based on the regular entry of migrants, their irregular permanence, and active integration into the labour market, and their subsequent regularisation through massive and extraordinary procedures or individually through legal roots.

Asylum in Spain has thus always been subordinated to this policy of labour migration, developing a restrictive system compared to the possibilities of regularisation and integration offered by the labour migration route. In this way, the underdeveloped Spanish asylum system, and its dissuasive practices mentioned above have led to a continuous transfer of potential asylum seekers and applicants to the labour integration route, transforming 'refugees' into economic migrants.

At the same time, however, and illustrating the contradictions and ambiguities of Spanish immigration policy, the recent growth of the asylum system in Spain may offer some migrants the opportunity to use asylum as an intermediate step to gain temporary legal access to the country and its labour market, and then, after being rejected and accumulating 2 or 3 years of residence in the country, to apply for regularisation on the basis of 'arraigo'.

Latin Americans are an extreme example of this asylum policy since they have easier access to Spain and to apply for asylum than potential asylum seekers from other regions. However, most Latin American applicants—except for Venezuelans—do not access international protection, as they are rejected at a rate of 96%, which pushes them towards the route of labour immigration. Venezuelan applicants mostly have access to humanitarian protection, but this is much less guaranteed and temporary—1 or 2 years at most—protection than that offered by asylum rights, which inevitably leads them to the same path of labour migration as the rest of the applicants.

Finally, this predominantly labour-based route of the Spanish migration model has not been accompanied by the development of an expansive and multi-level public integration policy, which explains the few external resources that the RP has at its disposal to develop its intervention and promote the integration of refugees once they have completed the programme.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The shortcomings of the RP, which interrupted and weakened the integration trajectory of ASBIP, are present in the current academic debate in Spain (Gabrielli et al., 2021; Jubany & Rué, 2020) and internationally (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Darling, 2016; Glorius et al., 2019; Van-Liempt, 2011).

Despite its recent growth, the underdevelopment of the Spanish RP in terms of resources and political and legal definition creates a space of instability and ambiguity that explains its daily intervention problems and pressures and weakens its role as a reception and integration mechanism. In perspective, the Spanish programme, mainly driven by the emergency, reinforce this lack of definition and instability of the system, which is transmitted to its main actors, to its intervention model, to its staff and, finally, to the applicants themselves.

The policy of territorial dispersal of asylum seekers is the second crucial problem of the Spanish programme. This policy, designed and driven more by economic, logistical, and socio-political reasons than by integration ones, dissuades asylum seekers from accessing the system, causes secondary displacement and weakens the reception and integration trajectories of the ASBIP.

Its third problem would be the lack of multi-level governance, which is expressed firstly, in the growing centralisation of the RP and, consequently, in its growing disconnection of the reception and inclusion resources of the municipalities and regions; and secondly, as a growing process of externalisation of the programme to NGOs. Two trends that have led to the 'balkanisation' and fragmentation of reception resources, and to a certain covert privatisation of the system, in which NGOs take over most of the care of refugees, but with scarce and unstable funding, which has a negative impact on the quality of their interventions, while in a way legitimising the multiple restrictions of the Spanish asylum model.

Finally, and to a lesser extent ascertained in the international literature, research has highlighted shortcomings in the intervention design of Spanish RP, such as successive and standardised reception phases with a lack of continuity between them; the excessively rigid profiles of the ASBIP used to define interventions; and the unilateral and linear approach to social integration.

Undoubtedly, the steady growth in asylum applications since 2015 helps to explain many of these persistent RP gaps. However, this paper argues that those problems are best explained by some structural factors affecting the asylum system.

The current restrictive asylum paradigm (Gabrielli et al., 2021; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011; Zetter, 2007) prevalent in the European and Spanish system, with its emphasis on reducing the arrival of potential asylum seekers and their access to international protection, clearly limits and shortens the development of Spanish RP, avoiding its costly economic and socio-political burden and the supposed 'call effect' that an orderly and well-resourced programme can represent (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022).

As is the case in other European countries (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Glorius et al., 2019; Stewart & Shaffer, 2015), this restrictive approach also helps to explain the current RP dispersal policy, with its emphasis on reducing the economic and political costs of refugees, and even its lack of multilevel governance, as its two main tendencies—centralization and privatisation—essentially represent a policy aimed at controlling and reducing the so-called refugee burden. As Darling (2016) has shown the dominant neoliberal policies and rising nativist policies also help to explain the current limitations of the Spanish RP.

In the Spanish case, as previously pointed out in the literature (Darling, 2016; Gabrielli et al., 2021; Ponzo, 2022), political differences and competences disputes between their actors also help to explain the heterogeneity and instability of the Spanish RP and its poor multilevel governance.

Finally, it is worth noting the relevant role played by two factors that have traditionally been less developed in the literature. Firstly, the design of the intervention model in the RP, which not consider the enormous diversity of ASBIP's profiles, and is overly based on a linear, simple, and cumulative approach to integration. And secondly, the role of immigration policy in the asylum and reception system (Gabrielli et al., 2021; López-Sala & Moreno-Amador, 2020), since, as we have seen, the prevalence of the labour migration model and the weakness of public integration policies end up subordinating and reducing the capacity and the scope of the Spanish RP.

In sum, the Spanish RP's shortcomings call for structural reforms in the asylum system to overcome the current restrictive framework. Some of the state's recent reforms go in this direction, such as improving the RP's funding system and formal coordination mechanisms with NGOs and other public actors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by [Juan Iglesias], [Rut Bermejo] and [Isabel Bazaga]. The first draft of the manuscript was written by [Juan Iglesias] and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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